

# DEMANDING THE IMPOSSIBLE: a strike zine



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background to the strike /  
the emotions of the picket line / the financial element



# DEMANDING THE IMPOSSIBLE

Made as a record and reflection on the February-March 2018 industrial action undertaken by Nottingham Geographers

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## GEOGRAPHY STRIKE SONG

To the tune of Bob Dylan's 'The Times they are a-changin''

Come listen now VCs, Accept what is known  
And admit that the strikers in volume have grown  
And accept it that soon you'll be all on your own  
'cos our pensions to us are worth savin'  
So you better start payin' or you'll sink like a stone  
For the times they are a-changin'.

Come strikers and pickets with posters and pens  
Let's keep up the pressure, the chance won't come again.  
Talks are ongoing, but the wheel's still in spin and UUK's  
getting a flaming  
Yes, the money lost now will result in a win  
For the times they are a-changin'.

Come VCs and UUK, please heed our call  
Don't axe DB pensions; force USS to play ball  
Staff stand with students, to challenge your gall  
There are pickets outside and they're raging  
They'll strike for justice forcing unis to stall  
For the times they are a-changin'.

Strike song video available at: <https://youtu.be/Hr7zFj9svbo>





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## BACKGROUND

### to the strike

**In February and March 2018, academics and other university staff in universities across the UK undertook 14 days of strike action.**

This was in protest over proposed changes to pensions under the Universities Superannuation Scheme (USS) brought in by Universities UK (UUK). The cuts were predicted to leave a typical lecturer around £10,000 worse off each year in retirement, around £200,000 in total. This is on top of previous cuts over the last few years, with this new round being so draconian that we felt we had to undertake industrial action.

A lot of the frustration has come from the methodology used that has claimed that there is a sizeable deficit in the USS pension pot.

**"The cuts were predicted to leave a typical lecturer around £10,000 worse off each year in retirement, around £200,000 in total."**

The strikes were led by the Universities and College Union (UCU) which balloted its members over the proposed industrial action and across the country, 88% of those who voted, voted for strike action.





# REVOLTING GEOGRAPHERS

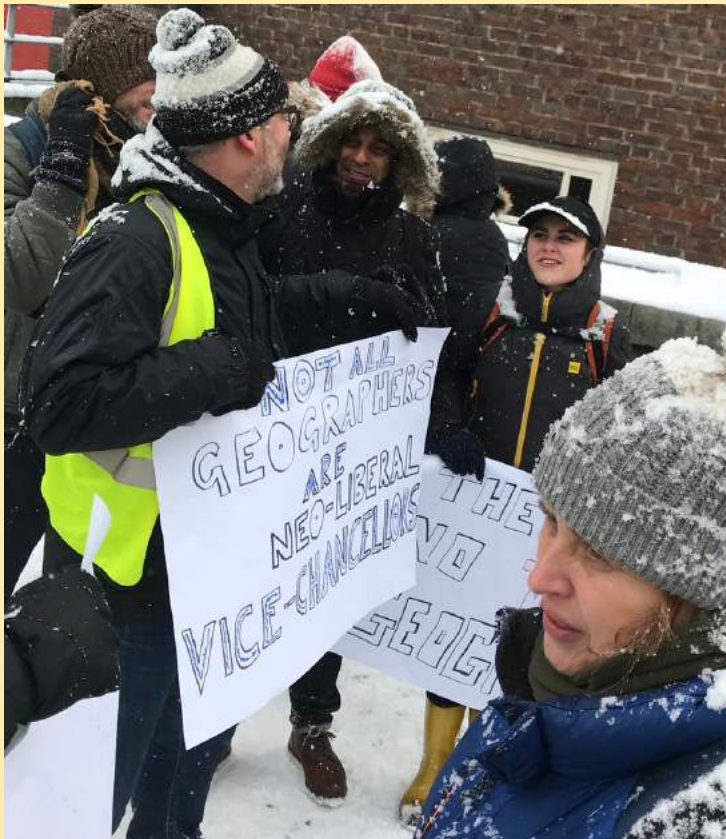
A photograph of UCL Geographers James Kneale and Tariq Jazeel holding a sign that reads: 'NOT ALL GEOGRAPHERS ARE NEO-LIBERAL VICE-CHANCELLORS' was shared on Twitter and a hashtag, #NotAllGeographers, was born.

This emerged as a resistance against prominent 'critical' geographers who have since taken up exceptionally well-paid university management positions and appear to contradict claims they had previously made in their work. University of Sussex VC Adam Tickell has been the main target here as his call to "slay the neoliberal beast" and his critical work on pensions are incongruous with his current prominent role in bringing in this new round of pension cuts.

A parody twitter account, Adam Tickle, has become the voice of this incongruity. Felicity Callard from Birkbeck has astutely analysed this in much more detail in her blog post available at [www.histhum.com](http://www.histhum.com).

Geographers make natural strikers due to our concern for the world around us, the way our awareness of space gives us an insight to the best picket lines (South Entrance being the sunniest of course), and our fieldtrip experience meaning we are kitted out for all weather, even the Beast from the East!

**We Nottingham Geographers are proud to be revolting!**



@AnsonMackay



@B\_B\_Fowler



## DB - DC = CDC ... !?

**The power of finance lies in part in its complexity and technical opacity.** The translation of a (by definition) uncertain future into a monetary value (what pension can I expect when I retire?) is to put it mildly a tricky business. One of the really striking (!) features of this dispute has been the way it has become as much, if not more a struggle over numbers (employee/employer contributions, accrual rates, CPI ...), archaic pension terminology (DB, CARE, DC, CDC ...), and competing valuations (Sept, USS, UCU, independent ...) as picket lines, demonstrations, petitions. Or as the Exeter geographer Clive Barnett tweeted **#WeAreAllPensionNerdsNow**.

But what do all these acronyms mean? How do they matter and in what ways? Should we care more for CARE (who'd have thought that a strike over pensions could provide such fertile ground for punnery!) or DC? Here are some brief(ish) thoughts.

### **A short history of our pensions present**

#### **DB (Defined Benefits):**

DB is great for employees (that's you and I, folks). DB provides the one thing that everybody wants from a pension; that is, security and certainty, which is two things but you get my drift ... With DB you know exactly what you can expect when you retire – the benefit is defined in advance and traditionally has been two-thirds of the final salary you draw, before you decide to put aside your dog-eared copy of Harvey's *The Limits to Capital* for the very last time ...

**"Or as the Exeter geographer Clive Barnett tweeted: **#WeAreAllPensionNerdsNow**"**

Employers aren't nearly as keen on DB pensions as they used to be. This is because they have a (legal) responsibility to make sure that there is enough money in the USS scheme to pay for the pension you have been promised and have worked tirelessly for 40 odd years for (i.e. your deferred wages). It is also incredibly helpful for Universities to be able to offload inconvenient DB pension liabilities from balance sheets if they are looking to borrow oodles of money to 'invest' in lots of shiny new buildings on campus to attract student consumers...

#### **CARE (Career Average Revalued Earnings):**

In an effort to cut the cost while still maintaining the security of DB, employers including pre-1992 Universities two years ago, have pushed a transition away from final salary to CARE based DB pensions. These are generally cheaper (it has been claimed that they are also fairer) because, as the name suggests, your pension is calculated (in a very convoluted way, see earlier point about complexity) on what you have earned throughout your working life and not just at the end when all the experience accumulated over a long and (hopefully) distinguished career means that you are at the peak of your earning power!



## DC (Defined Contributions):

Despite the move from final salary to CARE, Universities and other employers have argued that DB is still too costly and risky to continue to fund. The usual reasons that are cited include the:

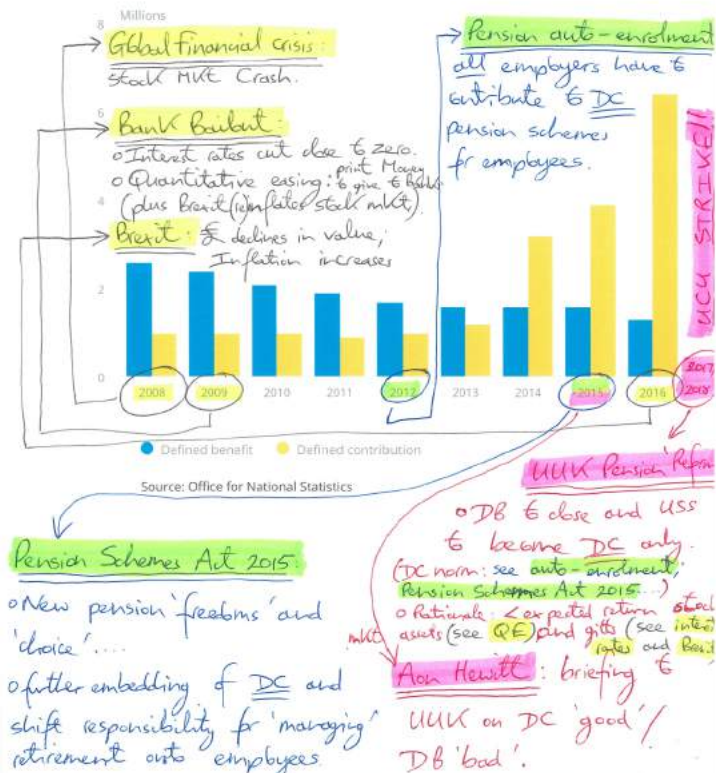
- growing regulatory burden of running DB schemes (from Robert Maxwell in 1991, to the BHS and Carillion pension crises most recently there is a long and far from illustrious history of employers failing to properly fund, and actively raiding and defrauding occupational pension schemes for their own nefarious ends);
- increasing life expectancy (people are living longer and therefore drawing pensions for longer);
- volatility of stock market returns and very low interest rates that have slashed the returns on Gilts (that is, debt issued by the UK Government which is a really important asset class for pension funds because the returns are very secure – Governments don't go bust, right!?). The reasons for lower and more volatile returns are complex (here we go again ..) but let's just say that the fallout from the Global Financial Crisis (quantitative easing, near to 0% interest rates) and the Brexit vote really haven't helped!

As has become clear the 'radical' solution proposed by UUK to such perceived problems is to close the DB scheme entirely and shift all employees on to a DC scheme. The logic works as follows: DB schemes are now too costly and risky for employers to be reasonably expected to bear (that is, too risky for all 350 employer institutions in USS to collectively share), therefore individual employees need to take on that cost and risk themselves. Makes absolutely perfect sense doesn't it!? Universities will continue to make a defined contribution to the pension scheme (UUK have committed to continue with the current 18% contribution) but critically each of us individually will be responsible for managing our own pensions, and will bear the risk (in terms of reduced pensions) of any 'wrong' investment choice. More on this in a moment ...

## CDC (Collective Defined Contributions):

In an effort to steer away from the neoliberal dystopia that is DC pensions, the TUC and Labour Party have both been enthusiastically promoting an alternative Collective Defined Contribution or 'Ambition' model. The UCU also appear to be increasingly keen on CDC as a long term alternative for USS. This still involves the displacement of all the risk from employers to employees (so UUK should be happy then!). If the return from the CDC pension fund investments (either because of 'poor' investment strategy or as a result of a stock market slump, again see Global Financial Crisis) is insufficient to fund the pension 'ambition' (the target pension for each member) then as in the case of DC pensions we (employees) bear the risk in the form of a reduced pension or having to work longer. That said, it is fair to say that CDC is much better than DC because at least this risk is borne by USS members collectively (i.e. we will all have a reduced pension) than individually.

## Normalisation of DC.



Adapted from ONS (2017) 'Membership of occupational pension schemes in the UK, 2008-2016'

# WHAT'S AT STAKE?

**First, and what should by now be clear is that these acronyms matter, for they have profound consequences for our quality of life in old age.** Whether the UCU is successful in retaining a 'meaningful' DB element to USS (and thus a guaranteed and secure basic income in retirement), or the employers preferred option of a full DC scheme resulting in as much as a 40% decrease in expected retirement income, or an as yet to be defined CDC scheme. As many others have pointed out the impact of each of these options will also vary considerably depending on gender, contractual status, seniority etc.

Second, however, there are just as significant implications in term of critical scholarship and the role of the academic as political subject. As Onni Gust (Department of History at Nottingham) stressed in a wonderful talk at one of the recent strike teach-ins, a (logical) consequence of the neoliberalisation of the University has been growing levels of anxiety and depression, both for students and staff. USS pension 'reform' in general and the proposed shift to DC in particular is already having the effect (affect?) of heightening uncertainty and anxiety in Universities.

DC will mean that academics, technical, library, IS, administrative and other support staff in the USS scheme will have to become, willingly or not, investors, learning to calculate risk/ return and taking individual responsibility for making decisions that will have far reaching consequences for our and our loved ones financial futures. Decisions that include, but are no means restricted to:

- **How much to invest in USS, above and beyond the employer contribution?** How much will be enough to secure a decent retirement?
- **Which fund or portfolio of funds to invest in?** Currently the USS DC ('Investment Builder') section offers a bewildering array of twelve investment options. Ten optional funds: USS Growth Fund; Moderate Growth Fund; Cautious Growth Fund; UK Equity Fund; Emerging Markets Equity Fund; Sharia Fund; Ethical Equity Fund; Bond Fund; Cash Fund. Two default funds: Default Lifestyle Option; Ethical Lifestyle Option.
- **When to switch your investment portfolio?** Each of our individual investment decisions will need to take into account such things as: the business cycle; stock market slumps; interest rate changes; when and how close we are to retirement (common wisdom is that it makes sense to invest in higher risk/ return funds at the beginning of career and switch to lower risk/ return funds when approaching retirement – again see effect of stock market crash on pension savings ...).
- **What to do when you retire?** What percentage of retirement savings to take as a lump-sum? Whether to keep your 'savings' invested in the stock market and draw down income from these investments? Whether to purchase an annuity to provide you with a more secure, but in all probability lower pension?
- **If, when and how to take independent financial advice?** The complexity and gravity of said investment decisions and the implications of a wrong calculation are such that inevitably each of us will be forced to seek costly financial advice. Financial advice that is likely to only temporally soothe anxieties over retirement futures.





It doesn't take much of a leap of imagination to realise that the cumulative effect of such financial uncertainty will significantly compound the extant anxieties of TEF, REF, NSS, PDPR, SET, SEM, and ... the list goes on and on! **The irony is of course that it was precisely the security of USS that long provided an unspoken quid pro quo, compensating in part for these other pressures.**

The tying of our atomised financial futures so intimately and immediately to the perturbations of stock markets and economic cycles also raises fundamental questions about the future and direction of critical scholarship. Positionality matters; and it deserves pausing for a while to consider how different the academic analysis of, and commentary on the causes and regulatory responses to the Global Financial Crisis, for example, might have been if the crisis was viewed through the prism of the impact on individual USS retirement fund portfolios? Speaking truth to (financial) power becomes more difficult to contend when our own futures become so directly dependent on financial markets and intimately bound up with the mantra of economic growth.

Finally, and most importantly it is not an exaggeration to say that heightened financial insecurity, atop of the mounting pressures and precariousness of academic employment risks endangering the future sustainability of Universities. The BMA is one of a growing number of learned societies that have publically voiced grave concerns about the negative impact the proposed pension 'reforms' will have on the recruitment of the next generation of academic medics. Our real fear is that the erosion of USS will be a tipping point that will similarly put in doubt the future of professional geography in the UK.

**This is why we strike!!**

# Principal officers & advisers

The principal officers of the trustee company are (left to right):



**Alan Higham**, Chief Pensions Strategy and Engagement Officer; **Kevin Smith**, Chief Service Delivery Officer; **Roger Gray**, Chief Investment Officer and Chief Executive of USS Investment Management Limited; **Bill Galvin**, Group Chief Executive Officer; **Jeremy Hill**, Group General Counsel; **Guy Coughlan**, Chief Risk Officer; **David Barr**, Chief People Officer (appointed 1 June 2017); **Howard Brindle**, Chief Operating Officer (USS Investment Management Limited).

## Nottingham strikers & pickets



Adapted from USS 2017 Annual Report





**Pickets are uncomfortable.** Those held nationwide in the UK this February and March were notably uncomfortable for various reasons. They coincided with the "beast from the east", or as geographers and other have traditionally know it, "snow" (and wind, "blizzard", then rain, hence "sludge"). Hitting the picket line at 7am and -5 degrees Celsius certainly focused the mind.

Our minds focused on a host of uncomfortable realities. The first, and most painful, was that students were suffering due to our actions. We all know from our teaching practice that students are increasingly under pressure and experience anxiety and depression. This is fuelled by the compulsion to secure the best grade to optimise their chances of securing a well-paid job, which will enable them to service the debt of their student loans.

**"the driving force behind these mental and social struggles should be that of "agonism" between adversaries not "antagonism" between enemies"**

A second uncomfortable reality, not yet realised for us, is the loss of pay. Giving up 14/365's of our salary is uncomfortable. A third, and disturbing, reality that emerged on the picket line and through social and journalistic media was of the process, simultaneously Byzantine and hypermodern, through which our pension earnings were being calculated, modelled, and determined. We are now all jobbing actuaries, statisticians, and negotiators, fathoming the weird reverse alchemy by which our earnings are magicked into numbers which then disappear, only to reappear as debt, guilt, and demands for higher contributions. The houses of our retirement are revealed (piff, paff, poof!) to be built on foundations of sand. You don't have to be a physical geographer to know that this is bad.

A fourth, and for now final, discomfort was the experience of division between colleagues. Rough estimates suggest that a third of research and teaching staff in the School of Geography are members of UCU and that a quarter of staff went on strike.

The picket line is a space of solidarity and learning, but it is also a barrier. It exists to educate people about a refusal to cross a line. But it also exists to shame those who cross that line. UCU were clear on outlawing intimidation of those who chose not to strike. But the undeniable moral force behind the logic of the picket line is that to cross it is to undermine the progressive solidarity of the cause. There are few counties in England in which the insult "scab" means more than in Nottinghamshire.

The clear, clean geography of the picket line is deceptive, however. Was it possible (one pondered, in the snow, stomping one's feet) to be on the picket line and to be a scab at the same time? Does being on strike simply mean declining your pay? Does replying to a work email on your phone during a rally speech undermine the speech? The geography of work has changed, and our place of work can be anywhere with 4G. How much striking constitutes a strike?

At pickets, rallies and meetings it was amazing to meet the cadres of UCU workers and supporters who turned up every day with banners, placards, leaflet and braziers (an actual brazier!), organising meetings, speeches, press releases and updates. The meta-striker! Without them we would have achieved nothing. And against them, it would be easy to feel a little feeble. The question raised (for me) by them, and the four foregoing forms of discomfort, was: with whom should we feel solidarity? And towards those with whom we do not find immediate solidarity, what should we feel?

My approach to these questions is, in part, informed by an awareness of the long political history of that grand, noble tactic "divide and rule". It is a wonderfully simple tool. Divide the enemy and they can't divide you. The response, difficult but effective, is to refuse these divisions. While we are mobilised by anger about the cuts to our pensions (£9000 p.a. less, give or take, and this from the USS's own calculator) the primary anger for me is the undermining of the university sector as a whole.

That means fighting for the pensions of all workers, striking or not. With the patience of a saint, therefore, the solution to our dilemma is total and limitless love.

Not even the most meta of the meta-strikers, however, is a saint. So how can we fashion our passion if we lack the ascetic godliness of a Mahatma Gandhi or a Mother Theresa? For me, a useful distinction that I keep returning to is that between agonism and antagonism (made by the political theorist Chantelle Mouffe, and popularised within geography by Eric Swyngedouw and others). The argument, very roughly, goes that we are living in an increasingly "post-political" society, in which genuine engagement, disagreement, and progressive dialogue has been replaced the rule of numbers, management and disengagement. This is felt to threaten democracy through flattening engagement in favour of consensus politics. The response is to insist on debate, on arguing, on fighting, even. But the driving force behind these mental and social struggles should be that of "agonism" between adversaries not "antagonism" between enemies.







Spatialising these distinctions onto the relations of the picket line, I don't feel a shred of antagonism towards those who chose not to strike, and I saw no evidence of it amongst others either. But what I think we all felt at times was an agonising intensity regarding adversaries (who could be and would remain friends, not enemies). I don't hate anyone in UUK, pushing for these punitive reforms, I just think their priorities have become muddled, and that they're not as good at maths as they think they are. I don't hate my colleagues who didn't strike, and I refuse to draw lines within my School. Each individual weighed up their personal circumstances and made a decision (although it was hard to ignore that the majority of picketers were early career and thus with the least capacity to sacrifice their salaries for the benefit of us all). And I don't hate myself, even though I kept on top of work emails, and started work on a conference presentation, because the cause will not be advanced by me giving a crappy paper at the AAG in April.

**"And the new ancient lore of social media is clearly that if you want visibility, nothing works better than a slightly miserable looking dog."**

So, back to work (for now...). We've all learnt a lot. I had forgotten how much fun a picket was, how much you learned and how many new friendships could be made. I didn't realise I could enjoy reading about pension statistics so much. I learnt that, despite attempts to divide our students and us by talk of refunds and the like, staff and students have been united by their joint struggle against indebtedness and blatant profiteering. I've also learnt more in four weeks about social mobilisation and political campaigning than I have in 20 years of reading about it. This was a virtual, national campaign, united by twitter and facebook. Negotiating these forms is the new tool of the 21st century striker. And the new ancient lore of social media is clearly that if you want visibility, nothing works better than a slightly miserable looking dog.



# STRIKE PSYCHE

**The strike is just 14 days off work right? How hard can it be?** Well as it turns out, it was an altogether bigger and all-consuming experience than I ever considered possible. It's the first time I have ever gone on strike, and I was singularly unprepared for the journey ahead. Here are some of the highs and lows.

Of course I anticipated a major ethical concern in how you might feel withdrawing your support and teaching from students, some of whom are vulnerable and at critical stages in their degree. Many of us struggled at length with this decision. In the end, there is an inescapable injustice: if we don't take a stand now, we set the scene for the long-term decline in academic quality for future generations. What we could not have known going into the strike, was the wonderful groundswell of support from students we would receive. These savvy students know what makes an educational establishment strong. It was genuinely heart-warming to see that they value high quality staff over the baubles and buildings that universities try to entice them with.



Strikes also create financial hardship. It's no small thing to lose half of your monthly pay. As a mid-career member of staff this was a factor that persuaded me to come out on strike. Losing half of my pay packet, has nowhere near the impact that it has on some of our early career staff. Most inspiration came from seeing staff on temporary contracts who did not hesitate to put themselves in a financially vulnerable situation. Many staff who are not on strike are donating to support the hardship fund. Having seen media portrayals of "strikers vs scabs", the reality for this strike was much more nuanced, with people contributing where they felt able to. This dispute is defined by its widespread support; not by warfare.

By far the biggest surprise about striking was the major psychological upheaval that it entails. For many university staff the job is all consuming. Removing yourself from the quagmire creates time to think. Time to consider: how and how much you work; your relationship with the organisation that you are working for. Picket lines provide focal points to meet colleagues from all over the university across a range of job families. To finally understand that your reservations about institutional changes over the past few years are widespread and deeply felt. Picket lines provide the space to meet with colleagues from your own school, who you would never otherwise have reason to. These conversations, alongside an evolving national backdrop of negotiations and announcements, have kept us all on a rollercoaster, but the important thing is that we are all in the same vehicle.

This strike has changed many things for me, and conversations with other strikers suggest that it has been equally transformative. It is hard to think that we can go back to the status quo and accept the way things have been. Perhaps this is the time for the real Project Transform.



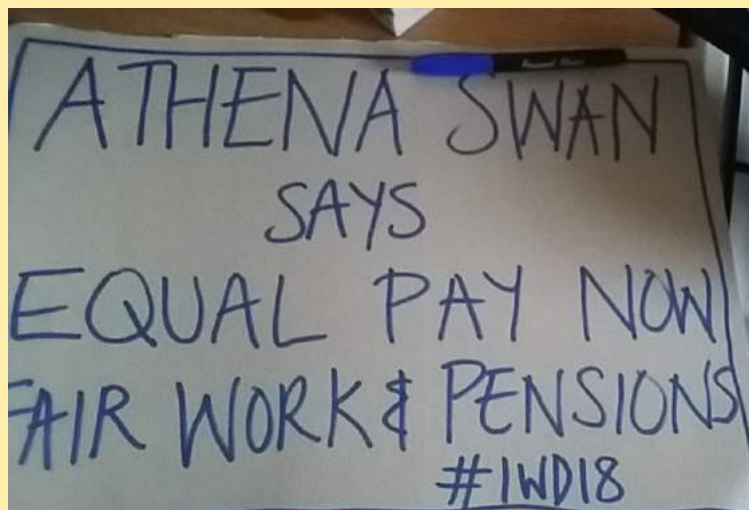
# VICTIMS OF THE PENSION CUTS

**Early career academics are already being hit with low pay and casualised contracts but the USS's pension cuts will deal another blow to poor working conditions for our most junior staff.**

The proposed cuts will only affect future contributions so anything already saved will be secure. This means that those nearer retirement will keep their pension pot largely intact while those who have only recently begun paying in or will be paying in in the future will be entirely dependent on the new scheme.

The strike days included International Women's day on the 8th March and this became an ideal time to highlight why pensions are a feminist issue. There are multiple reasons as to why these pension changes hit female academics the hardest but the main reasons are as follows:

- The gender pay gap in the UK (of 18.6% for basic pay) means that women are paying less into their pension fund over the course of their careers.
- Women and other minorities are more likely to be in precarious and casualised employment and more likely to be on lower paid roles. This lower salary again reduces overall pension contributions.
- Women are more likely to take career breaks due to caring responsibilities. Again this results in lower pension contributions.
- When women do get promoted this is likely to be at a later point than male colleagues which affects women's salaries.
- Women's life expectancy is longer than men's and therefore women tend to rely on pensions for longer. When pension become a 'pot' rather than a defined amount that will be paid out regardless of how long a person lives, the money has to stretch for longer and for an unknown amount of time.



The result of these points is that the gender pension gap exceeds the gender pay gap. The Chartered Insurance Institute has calculated that the average pension wealth of women in the UK by the age of 60-64 is one-quarter of the average amount held by men. For university employees under the proposed changes the situation will be increasingly worse for female employees. Because of this a group of academics compiled an open letter to Athena SWAN arguing that the proposed USS pension reforms are directly in conflict with the Athena SWAN Charter and the Race Equality Charter. There were calls for Athena SWAN awards to be taken away from institutions that do not state that pensions are an equality and diversity issue.

We therefore call on early career academics to come and fight with us for their futures and also for senior members of staff to stand in solidarity with those younger colleagues who will have a much rockier start to their careers than their predecessors.



## THE FUTURE?

**As a lecturer teaching and research are things I am passionate about, admin is, I acknowledge, a fact of life and something which I endeavour to do as well as I can.**

However, I've often been plagued by the feeling that I'm not doing any of these things well enough. It often takes me much longer to prepare for classes or complete admin tasks than the time the work load model allots. I struggle to fit in writing around term time, so do this at weekends or evenings. SET/SEM, PDPR, often provide useful and constructive feedback but bring around a feeling of anxiety of whether what I have done was good enough, what is the fall out if it's not?

The strike, by forcing me to stop, by enabling the time and space to speak to colleagues, by making me read about others experiences of academia, by highlighting the workings and motivations of university management, made me reassess these feelings of anxiety, stress and precarity which are shared by many academics and students. These issues are acknowledged by universities and yet through offers of support with mental health and wellbeing are individualised; you can be given the tools to learn to cope, you can become resilient. By devolving the responsibility on the individual to be more efficient, more effective in the workplace, any 'failure' is not indicative of the nature of system but an issue with you, you just did not cut it.

**"Anger can be productive, anger can be positive, anger can be empowering."**

This realisation that the pressure and anxiety I feel is in part a product of how as academics we are expected by university management to excel at research, teaching and undertake ever greater administrative tasks was in a small sense cathartic. Yet, any relief was swiftly replaced by anger. The pressures placed on staff and students as we move to a Higher Education system that is increasingly marketized are unethical. A placard in the strike that resonated was 'Education is a right not a privilege', and yet we already seem to be set on that course as universities claims to equality and widening participation sit at odds with many of their actions such tuition fee hikes.

So, although the strike was about pensions it gave space and time for much wider considerations of what the nature and purpose of universities should be. The strike filled me with hope and fear for the future of universities. I hope that they become more ethical institutions, ones where claims to be putting students at the heart of the university are followed through by meaningful actions rather than rhetoric and piecemeal gestures and initiatives. During the strike I was so enthused and impassioned to see some many people (staff and students) share a motivation to fight for greater equality, security and accessibility.



Yet, I fear that unless we win the pensions issue we will move further away from an ethical university and towards a neoliberal university with no possibility of return or retreat. The lack of support by senior colleagues and with university management digging in their heels or burying their heads in the sand (this is a comment on the strike as a whole not specifically or restricted to UoN) suggests there is much resistance to a truly open and inclusive university.

The strike has given us a pause to consider and reflect upon what direction we want Higher Education to go in and hopefully the confidence to believe there is enough momentum and solidarity to push for change. For me it has turned some of the anxiety around my own capabilities into anger at the current state of things. Anger can be productive, anger can be positive, anger can be empowering.

## MAKE SOME NOISE!



**It wouldn't be a proper picket line without a bit of noise to raise the spirits. So, what are this season's 'must-have' instruments on the picket line?**

1. The traditional wooden spoon and pan. Creates a rich and comforting chime. Highly recommended early in the morning.
2. The whistle. Popular among those keen to re-live their 1990s rave days. Highly transportable and effective, but those with sensitive eardrums should try not to stand next to a whistle blower.
3. Bicycle bell. Easy to operate. Take care not to mistake for rapidly approaching cyclist.
4. Sound system. Less weather-proof than the analogue alternatives, but more potential for lifting the spirits. Dearth of recent protest songs can turn the picket line into a 1980s school disco.



# THIS STRIKE HAS CHANGED EVERYTHING

**I haven't participated in a strike before.** My surface understanding of them came only from journal articles, the news and cancelled trains! But this tells you nothing of their true meaning. It speaks only of the dispute, the desired ends and the (disruptive) actions used to get there. From this perspective union action is framed to an act of reworking: the collectively withdrawal of labour in the name of improving working conditions within the capitalist system. This understanding harbours a sense of defeat. It sends a signal that we cannot escape the dominance and homogeneity of capitalism leaving us little choice but to fight for better wages and pensions, fairer working conditions, and less precarious contracts. Exhausted, we continue to swim against a neoliberal current as it pulls us down in an ever more rapid race to the bottom. This is of course a worthwhile fight, but it is a fight that keeps us trapped in white waters and reinforces their spiralling message that 'there is no alternative'.

Over 14 days of union action I developed a far more in-depth understanding of what a strike embodies: the emotional labour, the language, the stories and poetry, the relationships and, most prominently, the sense of hope. This strike was about much more than reworking. The anger over proposed changes to USS pensions brought staff together and catalysed action at and beyond the picket lines. It was the last straw on top of increasing workloads, temporary contracts, stagnant wages and project trans/deform: yet another depressing example of the neoliberalisation of universities that left us asking 'how did we let it come to this?' It was this understanding of dramatic cuts to our pensions as yet another wave in a growing tide of privatisation, marketisation and financialisation that pushed this strike towards an act of resistance. Staff and students alike recognised that they shared a common cause: to (re)create an education system based, not on monetary value, or even increasing student employability, but on the joy of learning, the value of critical thinking, and a deep recognition of, and respect for, the interdependent needs of staff and students. The former, we have seen, breeds anxiety,



## "This strike has changed everything, it has changed EVERYTHING" - Student occupier, University of Sheffield

depression and competition, and when combined with £9000 fees, transforms students into consumers and staff into service delivers. The latter breeds excitement and curiosity and lays the grounds for more productive relationships. This is not to say that we should ignore the reality of the post-university world of work, but that this in itself should not be education's primary goal.

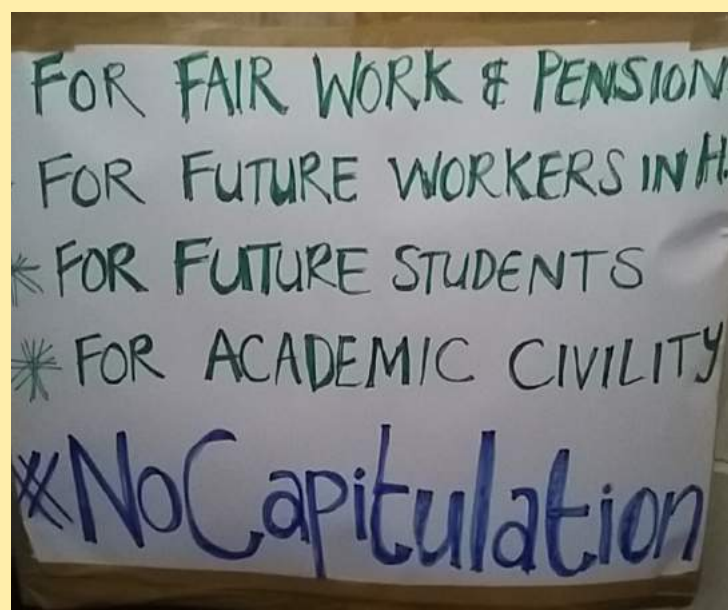
My understanding of the strike's transformation into an act of resistance emerged as I compared it to my experience of working and researching in worker cooperatives. Members of worker cooperatives do not work to produce profit or to improve their employment prospects. They come together in response to shared experiences of exploitation, precarity, and disempowerment, collectively refusing the inevitability of hierarchy, inequality and the commodification of their labour. Building on the energy of refusal they create new forms of work. Work that they enjoy, and that enables them to enact their values and develop meaningful relationships that surpass contacts or the exchange of quantified abstract labour.



These processes do not, of course, come without contradiction. Cooperatives, like universities, cannot position themselves outside of capitalism. While engaging in multiple modes of non-monetised exchange wages still need to be earned (and paid), and products and services still need to be bought and sold in a competitive market. But when situated within spaces of creation - and specifically in a context welcoming of plural ways of knowing, and ongoing discussion and contestation - contradictions between democracy and efficiency, and social aims and economic needs are reframed as productive moments. They become a means to develop new practices that enable cooperatives to operate at once within, against and beyond capitalism.

Similar seeds of creation and reframing were sewn during the strike. On a personal level the transformative impact emerged from my own experiences of contradiction: the forever present 'dual guilt' that told me, on the one hand to respond to the email from an anxious student, and on the other to remain loyal and true to union action. This was not a guilt limit to the immediate moment of deciding whether to reply or keep my hands deep in warm pockets on the picket line. It was a guilt that pulled my commitment to an ethic of care and my post-capitalist politics, my lecturer and my activist self, in two directions.

Reflecting on my experience of balancing cooperatives' dual social-economic aims and needs I came to see that this divisive pressure, and the resultant growing internal conflict, was heightened by the entwinement of these two 'selves'. Post-capitalist praxis demands an ethic of care for one another, our communities and the environment and, as such, developing relationships based on mutuality, empathy and a deep respect for diversity are in themselves prefigurative acts.



Such relationships were evident for all to see on snowy picket lines and through cries of solidarity at rain soaked rallies. In the context of the university they manifest in the valuing of students' knowledge and experience, and consequent efforts to resist and deconstruct hierarchical relationships that situate the lecturer as a fountain of knowledge and the student as an empty receptacle. They constitute listening, not to judge, but to learn; and teaching, not to spread your views, but to provide tools for student to develop their own understanding.

They demand we draw on empathetic resonance to understand the challenges and time pressures facing students and fellow colleagues, and that we look beyond our own stress and use it as a mean to relate to others and as a source of support. These enactments of an ethic of care push directly against the oft-asked question: 'what do I need to do to get a first and that sought after graduate internship?' They push also against demands from management that we focus our energy on research and the generation of research funding, and the reduction of our labour to quantifiable outputs. While the strike was not the source of these insights, it did serve to remind me of the prefigurative potential of such (seemingly mundane) everyday acts. When swimming against the tide of neoliberalism it is easy to lose sight of their value and become subsumed in worries about the REF, your next SET score, and the scathing reviewer comments awaiting a reply. A lone lecturer swiftly runs out of energy, and consequently any sense of hope. As a member of one worker cooperative explained:



*"I think if you are a sole trader, you are very vulnerable to switches of direction. We get people who want to start up a little organic business, say a restaurant or a café, (...), but it isn't long perhaps before they realise that the bills are higher and they are struggling, and they start to drop some of the ideals that they started with, and I think, that's the thing, when you are on your own, you are a bit vulnerable to being washed around (moving his hand back and forth across the table) with the stress, whereas having all of those people around you that are different, but perhaps similar, have similar ideals, keeps you a bit more steady."*



Standing with others on picket lines, exchanging knowledge at teach-ins and walking side by side at rallies reminded me that my own small day to day acts of re-making and re-thinking are one amongst many. When combined in constructive ways, and situated in the context shared ideals and a commitment to a post-(neoliberal) capitalist education system, they have the potential to create a wave equal to our (neoliberalising) enemy.

This takes me to the second transformative action: the strike demonstration of collective power. Cooperatives work because they act collectively, and more specifically, because they recognise and harness a sense of individual-collective interdependence. The members understand that the collective shapes them as they shape the collective, and that their own wellbeing and collective wellbeing are one and the same. This latter point takes collective power beyond the power of collective action. Solidarity and strength in numbers is of course important, but more than this, acting as interdependent beings sends out a clear message that responsabilisation and individualisation synonymous with neoliberal capitalism are not inevitable, and that individual and collective interests are not incompatible.

This challenge was played out in the strike as students came out in increasing numbers to proclaim, 'your struggle is our struggle'.

This sits in stark contrast to the rhetoric of 'students as customers' and rationale economic subjects weighing up the cost and reward of their education. Surprise surprise, students in higher education understand that their 'rewards' are entwined with the collective health of the universit(ies)! This is not a recognition based on a financial transaction. Commodification simplifies relationships: it dehumanises and depersonalises, and in doing so opens the way for inequality, unethical practice and the abstraction of labour. Rather, this is a recognition based upon mutuality and the very ethic of care entwined with post-capitalist politics. As such, it is a recognition that understands that universities constitute, not buildings and vice chancellors, but lecturers, teaching associates, support staff, technical staff, students, and communities. It is, in other words, a recognition that foregrounds collectively and mutuality over individualism, competition, and of course, concern over profit.

**"Cooperatives work because they act collectively, and more specifically, because they recognise and harness a sense of individual-collective interdependence."**



The final act of transformation came through the creation of opportunities for contestation and deliberation. The value of these acts is made apparent in worker cooperatives, where they are utilised to challenge accepted practices, raise questions over the values that these practices produce and reinforce, and develop new ways of working. It is through this that the pressures of capitalism continues to be resisted and the praxis of democracy is maintained. These spaces have been increasingly closed down in universities with the increase in precarious contracts and the growing gulf between decision makers and lecturers. The former creates fear that challenging the system will expose personal insufficiencies or failings that will limit opportunities for contract renewal (see previous article). The latter severs communication, not only literally through the reduction of informal opportunities to express discontent, but also through the loss of empathetic resonance. Those making decisions about the acceptable level of pension deficit and the appropriate level of investment risk do not share our experience of teaching and researching. Similarly, those drafted in to improve the (financial) efficiency of student's services or university departments have no basis to imagine the impacts of their decisions on students and staff. In this environment our concerns and discontent are delegitimised and reduced to the meaningless statistics of endless consultations that seem to do little but occupy more of our time, and extract energy and outrage that would be better used in collective acts of resistance. The picket lines and teach-ins reopened these closed spaces, offering opportunities for debate akin to those seen in the context of worker cooperatives' direct democracy. Here we left behind the hope-less world of consultations and unrealistic expectations for positive top down change. We focused instead on enhancing our collective power, not only identifying our discontent, but debating its origins and how it might be overcome. The challenge now is maintaining this momentum: continuing to engage in processes of self-transformation, finding opportunities to develop relationships founded in mutuality and an ethic of care, and actively opening spaces for deliberation. Throughout, we must recognise these acts, performed against and in spite of pressures of time and career progression, as acts of resistance in themselves.



**"Those making decisions about the acceptable level of pension deficit and the appropriate level of investment risk do not share our experience of teaching and researching"**



# GREAT STRIKERS

To reflect on my experiences on the UCU strike for pensions I tweeted about a Great Strikers 'team' who have inspired and sustained me through the strikes.

**Great Striker 1** is Ross Balzaretti, Head of History at UoN who inspired his fellow historians and friends in other schools by practising critical scholarship and leading from the front. While I realise that senior staff in these positions are under enormous pressure to act as managers rather than leaders I wanted to celebrate the critical leadership shown here.

My **Great Strikers 2** are Cordy Freeman and Kiri Langmead, early career geographers at UoN. Both have inspired me with their leadership and commitment, Cordy with her enthusiastic drumming and love of teaching and her much-missed students, Kiri through her care of students and contribution to the teach-ins.

Organisational and financial wizard, UoN geographer Shaun French, is **Great Striker 3**, impressing with his amazing double-sided banner skills, urging us to 'refuse to be investor subjects' and to 'be realistic - demand the impossible'.

My **Great Strikers 4** are a team in themselves, the fantastic Nottingham Occupy students. A large group camped out overnight in part of the iconic Trent Building, the UoN's main administrative centre, to support striking UCU staff and lobby visiting Russell group VCs, sustained by their passion for civic education, enthusiastic singing and long-distance pizza delivery from fellow Occupy students.



**Great Striker 5** is geographer Jo Norcup, intrepid strike supporter, with just the best banners and great coverage on social media.

**Great Striker 6** is another UoN colleague, Sarah Jewitt, whose reworking with her daughter Holly, of the Bob Dylan classic, 'The Times They are a Changin'' has helped me (and others I'm sure) believe that change is indeed a possibility.

My **Great Striker 7**, Andreas Fulder, a fellow UoN academic, has shown the importance of a sound defence of public education, underpinned by an ethic of care, to counter the marketization and objectification both staff and students are currently facing. We can create a humane and effective education system.

Throughout the strikes I've come across many other unions who have joined and supported UCU on the pickets and at meetings and they are my **Great Strikers 8**. They include the UNITE rep with a large banner who impressed us and the Occupy students with his own occupying experience in the Trent Building 40 years ago!

**Great Strikers 9** are Matt Green and the rest of the Nottingham UCU Committee who have informed us, organised picket rotas, meetings and teach-ins and listened so carefully to members' voices. Thanks for showing us an organisational model built on respect and two-way communication which is so lacking in everyday university structures.

**Great Strikers 10** are all those who have joined the strike, in Nottingham and at the other 60 plus universities, from geography and beyond, academics, support staff and librarians. Working together in solidarity makes us all great strikers!

Finally my **Great Strikers 11** are future strikers. If we have to strike again – and most people I've met hope we don't – and you haven't yet joined us please do. We need you, join with us – and complete our team of Great Strikers.



# DAY 9

## **A letter written by striking Nottingham geographers to the University of Nottingham School of Geography staff list.**

Dear fellow geographers,

We are now into the third week of what has turned into the largest and most significant strike in UK Higher Education for decades.

FYI, and given that non-union members will not have been receiving news from the UCU on the progress of the industrial dispute, we (those of us who have been picketing in defence of our pensions) thought that it would be helpful to provide an update.

As you will be aware the strike is in response to the decision by Universities UK to impose a much inferior pension scheme on staff (academic and support) in Pre-92 Universities. The UCU has calculated that this will result in a reduction in pension on retirement of up to 40%, equivalent to £10,000 per annum and will impact junior staff most. The UCU also estimate that members would have to strike for one month for every year we are employed to lose the equivalent in pension value that is being lost.

- Large numbers of staff, supported by many UG and PG students, have been picketing, striking and protesting across the country and geographers have been at the forefront in many institutions including Durham, Newcastle, UCL, Leicester and Exeter.
- The NUS are supporting the industrial action, and students have been on picket lines and writing letters of support to VCs. Nottingham students have organised a demo in support of striking staff on Friday 12-1pm, Portland Building.
- There has been a surge of new members of UCU both locally and nationally. Circa 150 new members have joined Nottingham UCU in the last month and the branch is now larger than it has ever been in its entire history.
- The strike has also raised fundamental questions about the role and purpose of geography, not least in relation to the critical status of the discipline and processes of marketisation.



And the strikes are working:

- A third of Vice Chancellors have publically called for negotiations over the pension. A significant number of VCs have offered public support for the strike(!), have announced that their Universities are willing to contribute more to USS, and a handful have even visited picket lines in solidarity with strikers.
- In a highly significant move the University of Oxford yesterday announced a reversal of their support for the USS changes following huge protests on Tuesday.
- VC Prof. Shearer West also held informal talks with Nottingham UCU yesterday morning, which we very much welcome.
- As a result UUK have been forced to the negotiating table. Having completely ruled out any negotiations before the strike we are now into a fourth day of ACAS mediated talks.

Strike action is a very last resort and we are acutely conscious of the impact on students, but the scale of the cuts to the pension, the threat this poses to the future of HE, the refusal on the part of the UUK to even countenance negotiations prior to the strike and the clear failure of the UUK to adhere to due process have left little option.

The greater the support for the strike and the more pressure that can be brought to bear on UUK, the quicker this can be resolved for all concerned. We would be delighted if you decide to join us. The greater the number of UCU members the stronger our position.

# STUDENT PROTEST POEM



**Dear Vice Chancellor,**

Why do you not seem to care  
about my education?

Let the strikes continue;

Jeopardize my graduation?

Why do you continue to take  
money from us still?

Put it in to secret pots and build  
on Portland Hill?

I doubt you've seen my lecturers,  
standing in the cold,

Losing out on pay- just to survive  
when they are old,

Step out of your office, put  
yourself in their shoes,

If you were them, what you would  
choose?



# THE STUDENT OCCUPATION

**During the strikes University of Nottingham students occupied the Trent Building to make six demands to University of Nottingham VC Professor Shearer West. The demands were:**

- 1) UoN Vice-Chancellor (Shearer West) must publicly come out in support of the UCU strikes!
- 2) Money saved by UoN from the UCU strikes should go into the student hardship fund!
- 3) Full transparency concerning the Vice-Chancellors expenses!
- 4) Democratisation of senior management wage allocation, including the introduction of executive pay caps!
- 5) Staff not screens! Re-prioritise spending at UoN so staff and students come before vanity projects like the big television and the stairs by Portland!
- 6) UoN must become an accredited Living Wage employer with no loss of pay for staff!



# DEMANDING THE IMPOSSIBLE:

a strike zine

